

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Yet Being Someone Other

Laurens van der Post

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About the Book

Yet Being Someone Other is the most revealing book that Laurens van der Post wrote about his extraordinary and eventful life, and the most far-reaching. It is a distillation of the many experiences that moved him at the deepest level of his heart and mind and made him the person he was.

The story starts with his childhood in southern Africa, and his passionate interest in the sea, an interest which led him, as a young man, to take part in two voyages of special significance. The first was on a whaling ship, with a Norwegian captain whose values unexpectedly nourished his own. The second was a long voyage to Japan. Both are absorbing tales of action and adventure, and, more than that, they are tales of personal discovery.

About the Author

Laurens van der Post was born in South Africa in 1906, the thirteenth of fifteen children in a family of Dutch and French Huguenot origins. Most of his adult life was spent with one foot in Africa and one in England. His professions of writer and farmer were interrupted by ten years of soldiering in the British Army, serving with distinction in the Western Desert, Abyssinia, Burma and the Far East. Taken prisoner by the Japanese, he was held in captivity for three years before returning to active service as a member of Lord Mountbatten's staff in Indonesia and, later, as Military Attaché to the British Minister in Java.

After 1949 he undertook several official missions exploring little-known parts of Africa, and his journey in search of the Bushmen in 1957 formed the basis of his famous documentary film and book *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Other television films include *All Africa Within Us* and *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, whom he met after the war and grew to know as a personal friend. In 1934 he wrote *In a Province*, the first book by a South African to expose the horrors of racism. Other books include *Venture to the Interior* (1952), *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961), and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (1986). *The Seed and the Sower* was made into a film under the title *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, and, more recently, *A Story Like the Wind*

and *A Far-Off Place* were combined and made into the film *A Far-Off Place*.

Sir Laurens van der Post was awarded the CBE in 1947 and received his knighthood in 1981. He died in 1996.

ALSO BY LAURENS VAN DER POST

In a Province

Venture to the Interior

The Face Beside the Fire

Flamingo Feather

The Dark Eye in Africa

The Lost World of the Kalahari

The Heart of the Hunter

The Seed and the Sower

Journey into Russia

The Hunter and the Whale

The Night of the New Moon

A Story like the Wind

A Far-Off Place

A Mantis Carol

First Catch your Eland

A Walk with a White Bushman

Jung and the Story of our Time

About Blady: A Pattern Out of Time

The Voice of the Thunder

Feather Fall

To
Captain Katsue Mori, Master of the *Canada Maru*,
Japan's senior marine officer and a great sailor,
with gratitude and affection.

Laurens van der Post

YET BEING
SOMEONE OTHER

V
V I N T A G E

“So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another’s voice cry: ‘What! are *you*
here?’

Although we were not. I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other –
And he a face still forming; yet the words sufficed
To compel the recognition they preceded.
And so, compliant to the common wind,
Too strange to each other for misunderstanding ...”

T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’

CHAPTER ONE

The Ambivalent Cape

UNTIL IT WAS all over, I had no idea how deeply I would be affected by my last voyage in the last liner from the Cape. Although it is several years now since I made that round voyage in the *Windsor Castle* from Southampton, I have not yet made my peace with the event and doubt if I ever shall. Whenever I return to the Cape, as I do regularly, and look down on Table Bay from the slopes of the mountain which gives it its name, it looks like a ghost harbour. It is still full of shipping but not the kind which made it, for me, one of the most exciting harbours in both the world and history. Unless there happens to be one of the rare cruise liners which treat the sea and its ports as sites for floating Butlin camps, I see only tanker after tanker, one more gigantic and unprepossessing than the other, interspersed with the proliferating classes of container ships, even uglier in line and general appearance than the greasy giant oilers.

The classical cargo ship, with its funnel amidships and tall masts fore and aft, is almost as rare as the cruising, pleasure-bound passenger ships, and about to vanish altogether. But what makes the scene so haunting is that the regular passenger ships which called in at the Cape for some four centuries and made the harbour a place of beauty, grace and colour every single day of the year, including Christmas and Sundays, have gone forever.

The passenger liner, bound on a distant mission and performing a regular service of great cultural value in a world scattered, separated and far-flung over seven seas,

has ceased to exist. Its service on the run between the United Kingdom and the Cape lasted longest, as became a service that was the first. It tried desperately to maintain its regular if reduced function long after passenger services in the rest of the world had accepted defeat and vanished, but in the end it, too, had to surrender, and the surrender was fulfilled with an immense dignity and unforgettable grace by the *Windsor Castle* on its final voyage.

The absence of these ships is what makes Table Bay such an empty and reproachful scene for me now. The loss of the beauty itself is hard enough to bear because the ships of the line, of which the *Windsor Castle* was the last, were perhaps the most beautiful ever built. From the moment they first appeared in the blue South Atlantic water, they caught the imagination of all and held it attentive until the end. To this day the Cape-coloured people, who have an acute sense of the sea and an unfailing eye for what is appropriate on one of the most unpredictable and stormiest of oceans, still sing songs about ships of the past. One of the most haunting of their songs is a ballad about the confederate cruiser *Alabama* which was the *Emden* of the American Civil War and which will be remembered in music as long as ships retain their meaning in the imagination of living men. Another celebrates *The Scot* built in the nineties of the last century and one of the loveliest of ships, which represented the 'Union' part of the 'Castle' line and held the record for the fastest run between Britain and the Cape until the thirties of this century. Accordingly, the ships of the combined Union Castle line, which carried the Royal Mail, were treasured to the end.

The ships themselves were invariably of a clean and graceful design and always managed to be contemporary, incorporating all that was most modern in nautical evolution without breaking with what was best in the traditional architecture of the past. Moreover, no ships took

to the seas half as well-dressed as they; their svelte hulls were of a lilac colour, just showing the red of their petticoats as the dancing sea of the Cape, excited by their beauty, swung them higher than perhaps it should have done. Their decks and masts were immaculately white and their funnels scarlet, with a band of black around them at the top to prevent stain of smoke and fume of oil and to hold them clean and clear against the sky.

Hard to bear as the loss of such beauty is, yet harder still is the knowledge that they were the end not merely of a line but of a long and significant era of history, leaving us deprived and unprepared on the hazardous frontier of an undiscovered world of mind and spirit and universe. That last voyage compelled me to look, as I had not previously looked, into the paradox implicit in the fact that someone born so far in the interior of Africa as I was should be so deeply concerned over the event, and prompted me to uncover in myself a sense of history and the sea which was in many ways not only a dominant factor in the evolution of my own life and spirit but of some importance for understanding what happened, is happening and is about to happen in our time.

I begin therefore in Africa and with this unusual sense of sea and ships. No matter how far we pushed north towards the unknown heart of the darkest of continents, this sense of the sea followed us about like our own shadows. Even when our creaking ox-wagons were probing the catchments of Crocodile, Elephant, Buffalo and Pafuri rivers, nearly two thousand miles from the Cape, it was so much in the minds of all those who led that march up-country that it compelled them to seek places with access to the sea and its traffic on which they had resolutely turned their backs. More significant still, when it was not a part of conscious reckoning, it was there deeply embedded as some reflex of the spirit which surprised everyone by the violence of its

reaction when touched on by some external event such as the ending of the Union Castle line.

I say this with certainty, because in the isolated little Voortrekker community beyond the Orange (or Great) River, as the aboriginal Bushmen called it, which was a thousand and one miles from the sea itself, I and most of my friends had this compulsive interest in anything to do with the sea. Our interest attracted knowledge just as a magnet attracts minute filings of iron. The largest section of my father's immense library which was set apart with books for his many children, consisted of stories about the sea. *Robinson Crusoe*, *Masterman Ready*, *Typee* and *Moby Dick* were all there, also Dana's *Two Years before the Mast*, Bullen's *The Cruise of the Cachelot*, Kingston's *The Three Midshipmen* and its sequel. There were numerous parallels from Dutch and French literature. But one book in particular, Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, had been read and re-read so much by my elder brothers and had such a wide circulation among their friends, that when at last I, the youngest, was able to read it alone and unaided, the copy was nearly falling to pieces.

Usually I would read perched as high as possible on a branch of an enormous Imperial Chinese mulberry tree, a pagoda of Pekin green; high, wide and awesome. It stood at the centre of our garden and, securely hidden by its enormous leaves, I read *Coral Island* from cover to cover. I had to climb down many times from my exalted perch to retrieve loose pages which, in the excitement caused both by the story and by the discovery of a great new world of the imagination, had slipped through my fingers and fluttered down on to the purple mulberry-stained ground. I would look out over that crowded garden and see the blue of the day breaking over it in the long swell of the African sun, and see it as surf and foam in an ocean of light. So intense was this experience that it filled my senses, as did the swish of the sea in a large mother-of-pearl shell which

we often held to our ears. A fancy more real than reality, that I was on some island in the unknown Pacific, would overcome me.

It would take the spire of the village church, and the cock on the weather vane crowing at the village below, to remind me that I was landlocked in Africa and some thousand miles from a sea I had not yet seen. Somehow, however, I knew that it was the sea and its role in the evolution of history which had produced so great a hold on me. This was confirmed when I came to read the sequel to *Coral Island*, called *The Gorilla Hunters*. In this book the same splendid threesome of Victorian manhood, Jack, Ralph and Peterkin, were sent out on yet more dangerous adventures in my beloved Africa. But for all that, the reading was for me tame by comparison with the first book simply because the element of the sea was lacking. It was the sea too which, in a version simplified for the young, established the *Odyssey* firmly at the centre of my emerging imagination. There, to this day, I see it as a dominant metaphor of the profound pattern of departure and return which encompasses the human lot on earth.

There were also the happenings on the long journeys between farm and village in the horse-drawn carriage reserved for my mother. She knew what a trial so long a journey in the heat and dust was for her younger children and so would invariably begin the journey by telling us a story, maintaining it with effortless art until she could bring it to an end just as we topped the pass in the line of red hills that encircled the village. From there we could see the church with houses huddled around it, in Anatole France's incomparable simile: 'like a hen and her chickens'. From beginning to end she told the story with a sense of the importance of detail, and also the authority of a fastidious memory which had been encouraged in her by the indigenous people of the land who had been nurses and companions to her from birth. These people lived without

ever losing their central conviction that a story truly told is a kind of religious experience without which life itself is diminished in colour and meaning. Their primitive capacity for recollection, which, in the absence of pens, paper, notebooks and other civilised means of recording, was dedicated to precision and totality as a matter of survival, is still sustained by a passion to avoid error and serve truth to a degree undreamt of in our computer philosophies.

My mother's memory was not only of the stories, myths and legends of Africa but also of long and complex European novels. When in later years I came to read Dickens, who was a particular favourite of hers, I was amazed to discover how little of the essential story my mother had left out. But on the privileged occasions when I made the journey with her alone and was asked what kind of story I would like, I invariably chose one connected with the sea. I remember in particular an account of *Robinson Crusoe*. From the moment we set off I did not notice anything on the long journey until Crusoe was safely restored to the world and I was called back to what passed for reality by the fact that the horses' hooves were suddenly pounding the hard surface of the main street of the village itself. And the sound amplified by the white walls of the gabled houses which lined it was, I imagined, like the beat of a retreat by the marines at the end of the day on the afterdeck of a ship of the line.

I could multiply the examples almost indefinitely but it is enough perhaps to add only that as today other boys play trains and cars, aeroplanes and spacecraft, so in those days I played ships and made models of sailing vessels to launch on the dams and streams of the interior which, inevitably, like the craft in the fiction and history which had inspired me, suffered shipwreck in their turn.

There was confirmation of all this too in the impact of my first vision of real ships at sea. My father had taken me along with him to the Cape where he had to attend a

gathering of the National statesmen summoned to deliberate the consequences of the act of Union of the four provinces which constituted the South Africa of today. I have forgotten almost everything about that fateful journey and the details of the crossroad experience of history with which it was concerned. The company of men like the ex-President of my native Orange Free State, Marthinus Theunis Steyn, and Generals de Wet and Herzog, and the subsequent visits to our hotel of Botha, Smuts, John Xavier Merriman and Abraham Fischer, made almost no impression on me.

I remember mainly the sea and my first view of it at midnight. Tired as I was by the long journey behind us, I persuaded my father to take me down to the foreshore. I was in the grip of a feeling of urgency that I cannot explain to this day. It was as if I had a personal appointment of the utmost immediacy and nothing, not even the sleep which I badly needed, should be allowed to make me late for it. I have no clear factual remembrances of the occasion but a great many feelings, most of them indescribable. The sea itself was at first invisible. One might not have known it was there were it not for the music with which it announced its presence. There was no wind, but some other power seemed continually to be shaking it and compelling it to move out of the darkness to break into a dazzle of white at our feet. Looking back on it all, it was perhaps the ideal introduction because that was how it was in my unformed mind: something coming out of the dark of the beginning before recorded time towards the "here and now" in which we find ourselves.

I cannot say that I found pleasure in that first meeting because it was so overwhelming. There seemed far more to it than physical sensation and excitement. There was something so awesome about it as to constitute almost an intimation, if not a revelation, of a super-natural kind. Particularly was this so when I looked up from the dazzle of

foam at our feet and into the midnight sky of the Southern Hemisphere, packed and stacked with stars in a way that the northern sky can never be. I noticed how this white fringe of the South Atlantic seemed to correspond to the Milky Way, and its spume of unformed stars lacing the tidal wave of darkness arched high and unimpeded as it bore down on the Southern Cross.

All at that moment seemed but foam and spray of one immense great ocean of darkness, and the experience did not become tangible until the following day when I saw the ships lying in the dock and riding at anchor in the dark blue Roadstead of Table Bay. With the morning light over all that golden scene, they seemed to figure as in a sort of dream which comes only to those who are still innocent and at one with life. I was fearful at that first moment of daylight and reluctant to look away and up at my father who was telling me about the harbour, and pointing out the mail-ship *Balmoral Castle* as being the most important vessel among the shining concourses. I feared they might vanish in the seconds that it would take me to look up at him and back at the Bay. It all seemed too beautiful to be true and not only enchanted my eyes but made a kind of royal music on the wind of morning in my ears. Indeed, from that moment I took to waking up early in the dark, apprehensive that I might have imagined all that I had seen the day before, and that the next morning would expose the brilliant illusion. At first light I would be at the window of my room and, as the dawn came up, it was as if the Bushveld were on fire behind the navy blue Hottentot's Holland mountains to the north of Table Bay. I would watch some of that flame flicker and flare on the red funnels of a ship far out in the Bay, burnish the tips of the slender masts of another ship moored deeper in the shadows, and then turn into a gush of blood the wound of rust in the flank of a tramp-ship until finally the crowded maritime scene was illuminated and brought out of the darkness in coats of many colours and

the whole vision of the evening before reconfirmed in every detail.

The great Cape itself, like the grit in the oyster on which the mystery of the pearl turns, was fixed firmly in my imagination at first sight and then transformed into a permanent point of growth for my love of the sea. My first view of it was towards evening from among the milk-bushes and dunes beyond Blueberg Strand. To look at Table Bay and Mountain from that point and at that hour was part of a solemn ritual of my father's life. He would always say it was the nearest he could get to reliving his first view of the Cape from the deck of a sailing ship some fifty-five years previously after a voyage of seventy-nine days from Europe. It had been visible like a smudge of cloud on the horizon of the blue sea on that morning so long ago. But then on a day made unbearably long, he emphasized, by an extreme hunger for land after so many confined days at sea, he and the whole crew had had to watch it acquiring substance with ponderous slowness until it stood in front of them tall and majestic, and much as we were seeing it at that moment. The view was more beautiful than anything the sailors had foreseen, and for him lifted the experience to an almost religious dimension.

The discovery that all this was an immediate part of my own family story, as well as the history of my native country, subsequently had a great deal to do with the impact of the experience. My impressions too were inflamed by the nature of that particular hour.

There is always for us who are truly born of the earth of Africa a kind of drama in the sunset hours, which no contrived theatre can equal. They are not merely remote impersonal moments confined to the external world. They are events joining the wheeling systems of a universe beyond even the light-year limits of our discerning, in a single totality because they correspond to a pattern within the human spirit, charged with a natural mythological

import as of participation at that precise moment in some kind of cosmological sacrament. I remember that even my father's voice as he talked to me about it was not quite normal. It had something 'congregational' about it, like that of some devout being repeating his responses to an ancient lesson in the temple. So much of this indescribable flow of the experience came to dominate my imagination that my father, always so clear, near and dear in my memory, is fixed like a fly in amber in that strangely translucent moment; an image of some initiate contained in a world beyond any immediate knowing, and listening forever to some inaudible murmur of the universe made audible by the miracle of the hour.

When he did speak again it was to stress how uncanny it was that he could show me the view exactly as it had been that evening, fifty-five years before, when the ship was preparing to beat up and down the Roadstead stained with sunset so as to be ready for disembarkation at dawn the next day. Devil's Peak, which he pointed out to me on the left of the central mountain, the Lion's Head on its right, falling away into its rump at Signal Hill, they all stood just as boldly then as they did now, except that Table Mountain itself, contained as it was in its own halo of light, seemed perhaps higher, wider, more authoritative and imperious than it had been in the past. And so much did he appear to relive the hour that it was as if the years in between had become a weight of some kind which caused his shoulders to sag whenever he pointed out the scene. And that alarmed me. But the difference, he feared, was subjective, because there was still no doubt in his mind that the objective message was the same. The empire of the sea ended there and an imperative of land as great, of which the mountain was the plenipotentiary, began right there where it stood. His voice, still in the grip of the original emotion, deepened as he spoke, and indeed every inch of the mountain's height confirmed what its name implied -

The Cape of Good Hope – of great and new good hope for all of them perhaps. He understood why his own father had referred to David the psalmist, who had once called on his own fatigued self in another land of promise to lift up his eyes to the hills from whence would come his help. How much those on board were about to need help from beyond themselves, and how unprepared they were for life in the world of which that Cape was ambassador, was illustrated the next morning, by something considered trivial and rather funny at the time.

They were watching numbers of tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, dark men wading out through the surf towards the ship's boats in which the passengers had been lowered, in order to carry them ashore in their arms. My father's youngest brother, seeing what was happening, cried out in terror at the black faces that he had never seen before, "Father, please don't deliver me to the devil!"

It was just as well to remember, my father reminded me, history being such an unpredictable and contradictory process, that not everyone who had seen the Cape in the past had thought of it in terms of hope. The first name bestowed on it by Europeans was the Cape of Storms. There was no doubt that where the Cape drove a wedge into the sea for some ninety miles between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the greatest storms of wind and water of which nature was capable were constantly born and reborn. Looking at the cold Atlantic, utterly resolved and at peace in the bay as if already curled up for sleep in the curve of the arm of land which kept it from the warm Indian Ocean only some thirty miles to the east, such duplicity seemed unbelievable.

But our farewell visit provided a disturbing confirmation of what my father meant. At first glance Table Bay was tranquil and full of light. But as the sun began to go down, the green-blue sky turned sulphur and suddenly, between it and the mountain, we noticed a strange kind of murk, half

mist and half cloud, smoking over the sea towards the south before it fanned out and came racing towards us. A moment before, the long level light had so enveloped the mountain that it seemed not lit up from without but rather glowing from within like a lamp from its own flame. Transformed, too, was the flat marble top of the mountain itself which had led man to name it 'Table'.

My father had already made it clear to me how much he disapproved of the name. He thought it was an unpardonable euphemism, diminishing the mountain's reality and typical of the arrogant way in which Europeans had taken liberties with the essentially wild and pagan phenomenon of Africa. It was too good an opportunity for him to miss another homily on the absurdity of this European attempt to domesticate a great mountain by calling the advancing cloud its table-cloth. Impelled by immense forces, it was already fluttering in rags and tatters torn of itself over rocks and cliffs, as it pressed down on to the mountain. We had hardly observed this sudden change in the scene when we heard one of a group of Malay fishermen working on their nets nearby exclaim, "Allah! World! People! Look at that old mountain, thinking up his own weather again!"

After the untroubled calm and sense of magisterial benevolence which had been my experience until then, the transformation was frightening. For me the Cape, in an instant, had become a living and vengeful gigantic presence. The impression went so deep that when, many years later, I was to encounter its personification as the resentful Titan, Adamastor, in the *Lusiad* of Luis de Camões, I instantly understood what had inspired him.

By the time we arrived back at our hotel a south-east gale was racing down the face of the mountain, pouring through the spaces between Devil's Peak and the Lion's Head, and testing every anchor of that line of ships that we had seen riding so confidently in the darkening Roadstead

as they waited for room and shelter in the crowded dock at the far end of the Bay. Before long it turned into one of the most fearful of south-easters ever unleashed over the Town and Bay. We heard its music riding high and wild all through the night. The thick walls of the building shook, shuddered and at times felt as if they were reeling like a ship under the blows of the wind. Such sleep as I had was troubled perhaps by the first inkling that life was not made with the clear-cut simplicity for which one longed, but that the reality might be profoundly ambivalent and the manifest appearance only skin deep.

There is not another cape that has so dominated not only my own but also, I believe, the imagination of the world. Alone among the great capes of the world, the Cape of Good Hope seems to have been dressed to perfection by both earth and fate for the two-sided reality that it was destined to play in our history: at one moment an image of hope, at another the ultimate symbol of storm.

When the great Bartholomew Diaz returned to Lisbon in 1488, the few survivors among the many who had accompanied him on that brave voyage down the west coast of Africa gave such a harrowing account of the storms they had encountered off the Cape, and how they had beaten about and fought seas and winds for thirteen days before they discovered that they had rounded the southern-most point of Africa and were at last heading north, that they induced a vast majority of the Portuguese to think of it as they did, the Cape of Storms. But Diaz himself, who had in vain tried to make them sail on further north to what he was certain was a new way to the East, added to the ambivalence when on reflection he called it the Cape of Good Hope. Columbus himself was present at the court in Lisbon when Diaz later came to report to his King, and there is to this day a copy of the *Imago Mundi* with a note in Columbus's own hand, recording that

Bartholomew Diaz on that occasion referred to it as the Cape of Good Hope.

His discovery was the culmination of more than a century of endeavour by the Portuguese to find an alternative route to the East. Columbus and many others had set sail with much the same intent to probe the unknown oceans westward towards the Americas. Historically, the explanation has always been a purely rational one, that it was lust after the spice, silk and treasure which the great city states of the Mediterranean like Genoa and Venice had for so long monopolised. For me, however, there has always seemed to be more to it than this plausible one-dimensional explanation: it was part of one of the most significant compulsions of the Renaissance spirit.

If it had been merely a matter of materialistic greed, I do not believe that the sailors of Spain, Portugal and the rest of Europe who soon followed would have overcome the superstitions of centuries and ventured out of sight of land and sail over great oceans which had been an inviolate frontier of the western world for so long. Laughable as superstitions may always appear in hindsight, they were powerful enough in an age when only the esoteric few believed that it was the earth which moved around the sun and not the other way round. The rest believed firmly that the earth itself was flat and stood on pillars, as not only many mythologies emphasized but also one of the most famous psalms in the Bible. Convinced as they were that the earth was flat, they had no doubt that if one sailed far enough one would come to the edge of the world and drop off into a bottomless abyss, inhabited by unimaginable monsters and evil spirits. They felt this not only about the seas but also about the land which surrounded them.

For centuries no-one living among the Alps of Europe ever dreamed of climbing them out of fear of the supernatural forces which their beliefs invested in their

summits. Indeed C. G. Jung, one of the greatest explorers of the European spirit in a truly twentieth-century way, told me that if one wanted to fix a precise moment at which the Renaissance began, it would be the day when the Italian poet Petrarch decided to defy all superstition and climb a mountain in the Alps, just for the sake of reaching its forbidden summit. Perhaps this was therefore the first tangible evidence of a profound shift in European spirit, the first sign that, after centuries of introspection, the imagination of the West was swinging over into another principle of itself, and beginning to focus on an external world for too long underrated.

Accordingly this eruption of a passion for exploring the unknown world beyond the seas took on a far greater meaning for me than the plausible explanation which conventional history allowed. It had always seemed axiomatic to me that faith, in the sense of an intimation of evidence of things not seen and yet to come, can only be replaced by faith of a greater and more contemporary kind. Somehow in this profound shift of focus in the area of the human spirit where faith arises, greed found the power great enough to demolish the impediments which had confined the imagination of the West for over a thousand years in an overwhelming concern for the world within.

In the part of Africa where I lived, concepts such as whether the earth was round and rotated round the sun or not were still subjects of passionate argument and sometimes violent debate at school and in our churches. My father, who had twice heard the President take an uncompromising stand on this issue against distinguished international personalities, had often spoken rather whimsically about these occasions. One was the meeting with Mark Twain who, because of this, subsequently had much characteristic fun at Kruger's expense. The other was a meeting between the President and the lone American sailor, Joshua Slocome who, I believe, was the first man to

travel single-handed round the world. On his arrival at Port Natal, Slocombe took time off to call on Kruger, the most accessible of Presidents. Asked what he was doing, Slocombe answered innocently enough that he was sailing around the world. To his amazement he found himself instantly and sternly rebuked for making so erroneous and blasphemous a claim.

My father's account of those two incidents was a source of great amusement in our family circle. But outside I knew it was no laughing matter and indeed was so dangerously controversial a subject that I soon learned it was best left to our teachers of geography and physics. It was rumoured that Kipling wrote 'The Village that voted the Earth was Flat' after a brief visit to us during the Boer War.

As a result, from an early age I was receptive to the achievement of the great Spanish and Portuguese sailors who had discovered our Cape and the Americas. What started as an instinctive feeling became in time an informed conviction that, although material gain played a significant part in the matter, a far more powerful urge of the human spirit had come to the fore. This urge was for me the real heart of the great reawakening of Western man that we call the Renaissance. The great new activity of man and ships demonstrated that there can be no thrust into what is unknown in the external world without being accompanied, if not preceded, by an equal and opposite thrust into the world of the spirit.

I do not pretend that any of this was consciously present in my mind then. It was more an instinctive concern for the meaning of history, sustained by the voyage ten years after Diaz of perhaps the greatest and most ruthless Portuguese sailor of all: Vasco da Gama. Following in the wake of Diaz, he rounded the Cape in the calmest of seas, seeing it, I believe, much as I had first seen it myself with my father in that translucent, sunset moment, locked within the stream of my memory like a tranquil lagoon. The feeling of hope

induced in da Gama by the strangely passive sea of the Cape was reinforced by his progress north and up along the inhospitable and harbour-less coast of Africa to Kilindini, which is Mombasa today, and thence to India and the Far East.

This achievement, which was a breakthrough as much in the mind as the physical world, was enough for all the world to take it at face value and to confirm until this day the vision of it as a Cape of Good Hope. However, when I came to learn at school that the Portuguese word for storms was 'tormentos', another emphasis was added to my own private preference and the sense of the ambivalence of experience in which it was rooted. Tormentos suggested both storm and torment to me. As a result I came to amend my own name for the Cape by borrowing from Camões and thinking of it always as a 'far-flung and much tormented Cape'.

The sense of ambivalence that I felt about the Cape seems to have been shared by the sailors who faced the immense hazards of the voyages between Europe and the Far East. The hope of gain and riches, hitherto beyond the dreams of a poor country, without doubt sustained Portugal in reinforcing an increasingly disastrous traffic of ships to the Far East. But the sailors, soldiers, administrators and their families who lost their lives in unbelievable numbers through shipwreck and malnutrition – even the survivors could never participate to any appreciable extent in the gain that was expected with such high fantasy – must have been motivated by something else or they could not possibly have endured and perished as they did. My own hunch was that as ordinary people they lived not by ideas so much as by an instinct that flesh and blood was created precisely in order to serve this other meaning of history that I have mentioned. Much as those in command of the world exploited the energies of simple men and women who were motivated by an instinctive belief that they were

promoting a continuation of purposeful history and, above all, that the society and culture to which they belonged was an expression of great meaning, there was nothing that they could not endure. For instance, I was convinced that the people who conducted the traffic by sea between Europe and the Far East, from the greatest captains to the most humble sailor, could not have done what they did if they were not possessed by the feeling that somehow they were serving the ultimate reality they called God.

It was significant that almost all the Portuguese ships had religious names, unlike their English, Dutch and French counterparts, who were soon to follow and add a ruthless, bloody rivalry to hazards of the sea. In some four hundred years of sailing between Portugal and the Far East, only one hundred and forty-one out of one thousand, three hundred and forty-four of their greatest ships, and many lesser ones, had names devoid of religious associations. Wherever they landed and established ports, trading centres and ultimately colonies in Africa and, above all, India and the Far East, they put the conversion of the indigenous peoples to Christianity before trade and profit. In this they displayed a fanaticism of faith that was both great and terrible. Were it not for the horrors of the two World Wars, and particularly the concentration camps and gas chambers of Germany, one would be tempted to deny any claim of humanity in the Portuguese of that day. Vasco da Gama himself thought nothing of setting fire to the ships he encountered in Far Eastern waters and then watching them burn, without compassion for the women who thronged the burning decks and held up their babies and children in an appeal for mercy. At Calicut he cut off heads, hands, ears and noses of eight hundred prisoners before throwing them in the hold of a ship which was allowed to drift ashore while all night long, the historians tell us, the beaches were crowded with weeping men and women searching for corpses of murdered friends and relations.

And Vasco da Gama was by all accounts the personification of what passed for a Portuguese gentleman and nobleman in attendance at Court. For those considerations he was especially chosen to lead the first Portuguese venture into the forbidden and unknown world beyond the Cape. Pedro Cabral, Francisco d'Almeida and Alfonso d'Albuquerque, also nobles and viceroys who followed da Gama, were just as cruel and militantly zealous in their pursuit of what they regarded as their Christian duty to convert the unbelievers of the Far Eastern world. The editor of the account of the voyages of the great French sailor/explorer, François Pyrard, tells us that the outstanding characteristic of the Portuguese during the first fifty years of their penetration into Asia was their fanaticism. Indeed, Pyrard remarks: "Throughout the whole period the religion of Christ was invoked for the sanction of acts of cruelty and oppression hardly surpassed even in the annals of the East".

There were, it is true, great and honourable exceptions, particularly among the Jesuits, who were the most zealous of missionaries. The outstanding example of course was St Francis Xavier. By force of his example and passion for the cause of his Church, he alone established Christianity in Goa and the south of India so firmly that Roman Catholicism to this day is still a significant reality in the lives of millions, despite the teeming Hindu context of their world.

Even more impressive was Francis Xavier's achievement in Japan. He converted the Japanese to Christianity in such numbers that the Tokugawa Shogun who ruled the country banished Xavier's successors and all the Portuguese from the country. It is interesting how different was the behaviour of their successors and rivals, the Dutch, who persuaded the Shoguns to let them take the place of the over-zealous Portuguese Christians. Greed alone seems to have been their motive, as their murdering of the English traders in the island of Amboina in 1623 had already

suggested. It was a passion almost as ruthless as the religious obsessions of the early Portuguese. The Dutch established what they called a 'factory' at Doshima, an island off Nagasaki, and were allowed to send a strictly limited number of ships to Japan, but on condition that, twice a year, the commander of the factory and his principal officers allowed themselves to be paraded through the streets of Yedo (as Tokyo was then called) dressed like clowns and other comic figures and generally subjecting themselves to public humiliation. Above all, once a year they had to trample on a wooden cross in front of a Japanese official. Yet for centuries the material gain was thought well worth the depravity implied in the process so totally without reservation that Toynbee in his *Study of History* comments that the reader of the story "is left at a loss between admiration for the tenacity and disgust at the servility with which these Nordic Protestant occidentals held their ground and made their money".

Coming as I do from Dutch and French Huguenot ancestors in almost equal proportions, this aspect of history in which the Cape of Good Hope was to play so crucial a part became a salutary corrective to any tendency towards excessive nationalism that I may have had. It also allowed me to view the Portuguese excesses in the context of a period when for example the tortures of the Inquisition could be accepted without any of the horror which would be felt today. At the same time I was able to picture the heart-rending sight of Portuguese Armadas setting sail from Lisbon with, so the historians tell us, vast crowds of weeping townsmen of all classes led by priests carrying crucifixes, following the sailors down to the shore to pray for their safe return.

No wonder Lisbon five centuries ago had coined its own proverb for these occasions, "Deos as leva, Deos as traz" (God carries them out, God brings them back). For them it was clearly in every way more of an affair with God in the

hands of God than a vulgar commercial transaction. Already in Diaz's day Portugal was singing a form of Fado, a 'song of fate' which remains a popular art form to this day, hinting at all those other greater non-rational and subliminal urges in the Renaissance spirit which ultimately tend to redeem somewhat the increasingly sordid affair between Portugal and Africa and the Far East. It went something as follows:

*I saw, my mother, the ships,
sail into the sea,
and I died of love.*

*I went, mother, to see
the ships on the Strand
and I died of love.*

*The ships on the sea
for them I went to wait
and I died of love.*

*For them I went to wait
and I found I could not
and I died of love.*

Shipwreck, almost unendurable hardship at sea, and the constant and mysterious disappearance of vessels became so normal a part of Portuguese experience that it inspired a special literature of its own. Ordinary Portuguese men and women had their imagination so inflamed by what was increasingly a national horror story that they acquired an insatiable appetite, not just for factual records of what happened at sea but for fiction about the sea, ships and the men who sailed in them. It was called *Literatura de Cordel*, loosely translated as 'string literature'.

It was given this name because so many stories of this kind came from the pens of popular Portuguese writers that they were rushed into print in a glorified pamphlet form